



The Grieving Child

HELPING CHILDREN COPE WHEN AN INFANT DIES

“If a child is old enough to love, he or she is old enough to grieve.”

—Linda Goldman, *Life & Loss*

Our lives consist of beginnings and endings. Many of them we share with our children: the beginning of a summer vacation and returning home, sunrise followed by sunset. Because death is a part of life, this, too, must be shared with our children. While our cultures or religions have different views about what happens after death, we all share an understanding that our bodies do not last forever. We can help our children accept the loss of a life by providing a clear explanation of death, combined with age-appropriate support, as they cope with the loss of a baby brother, sister, or other cherished infant.

Explaining the death of an infant sibling or loved one can be a difficult, sensitive, and painful process, especially when parents are also grieving. Because some adults have problems dealing with the reality of death themselves, they may find it difficult to explain death to a child. Children grieve the death and react to the emotions in the household, but they need reassurance that they are not to blame. The best approach is to be truthful. Answer any questions about the cause of death honestly, even if it means saying “I don’t know.” Be honest in your talks and use simple language that children can understand.

SUDDEN UNEXPECTED INFANT DEATH

When a baby dies suddenly, there is often a great sadness, and every family member experiences the death and walks the path toward grief recovery in a different way. Children who are too young for complete explanations need love from their parents to feel secure.

Some young children may be frightened. They may cling to parents and develop behavior problems. Others may feel responsible and need assurance that they did nothing to cause the death.

Whether the loss is due to Sudden Unexpected Infant Death (SUID) (where the cause is eventually determined) or to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) (where the cause of death cannot be explained even after a thorough investigation), children need reassurance that this sometimes happens and that *they* will not suddenly die, too.

Helping Children Cope

Talk to children about death using language they can understand.

Answer children’s questions honestly.

Allow children to express their feelings, and let them know there is no “right” or “wrong” way to feel.

Be willing to talk about the loss many times and in different ways.

Reassure children that the death was not their fault and that this will not happen to them.

Be comforting, provide attention, and show affection.

WHAT TO EXPECT & HOW TO HELP



AGE	CHILD'S OR TEEN'S REACTIONS	HOW TO HELP
Birth to age 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affected most by the mood of their caregiver. • You may see changes in sleeping and eating patterns and mood. • Older infants and toddlers may demand more attention. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain routines and stay in familiar places. • Provide love, attention and reassurance. • Provide a caring substitute if parent is too distraught to respond.
Ages 3 to 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not understand that death is permanent. • Fears the dead person is cold or hungry. • Repeats questions, and fears that others and/or self will die. • Afraid to go to sleep; may have bad dreams. • May play-act events around the death. • May revert to earlier behaviors and/or exhibit physical symptoms. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain routines; provide affection and attention. • Answer questions as often as child asks. • Look into child's eyes; gently hold the child when speaking of death. • Allow expression of feelings—re-enacting events, drawing, reading. • Avoid words like <i>sleeping, resting, lost, passed away, God took him.</i> • Use concrete terms like <i>the baby died, the baby isn't coming back, the baby doesn't eat or grow.</i>
Ages 6 to 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Views death as mysterious—takes baby away or caught like a cold. • Some still think death is not permanent. • May be obsessed with cause of death, what happens to the body. • May feel responsible due to past actions, words, wishing sibling dead. • May be distressed, sad, or show no signs. • Fears loss or abandonment by family members. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain routines. • If leaving, tell child when you will return and how to reach you. • Listen to child express thoughts and feelings; provide a journal. • Answer questions honestly. • Reassure that the death was not child's fault. • Contact child's teachers.
Ages 9 to 12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understands that death is permanent. • May seem unaffected by death. • May see the death as punishment for bad deeds. • May show anger, guilt, grief. • Physical symptoms are common. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide time and affection. • Encourage child to express feelings. • Reassure that death was not child's fault. • Be honest about what you are feeling. • Contact child's teachers.
Teens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May feel confused, sad, guilt, angry, lonely, afraid. • May experience physical symptoms. • May try to hide feelings to protect parents. • May assume responsibility for family well-being. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk without criticizing or judging. • Be willing to talk in the teen's time frame. • Be honest about your feelings. • Allow the teen time alone and to grieve in his or her own way. • Discourage teen from assuming too much responsibility.

Adapted with permission from The California Department of Public Health, Maternal, Child, and Adolescent Health Division and The California SIDS Program. 2005. *A Practical Guide to the SIDS Home Visit. How Children React to Death: Age-Specific Reactions and Help Guidelines* (Section 2, Table 10, pp. 20–21).

SEEKING SUPPORT SERVICES

Each child reacts to the death of an infant in a different way. In the months after the infant's death, parents and caregivers should keep in touch with the child's teachers and health professional about how the child is coping. Mental health professionals can also provide support to parents and children. Additional resources for families include hospice organizations, local health departments, bereavement support programs, and community or religious leaders or healers.

FUNERALS AND FAMILY RITUALS

Allow children to be included, if they wish to participate, in family mourning rituals such as funerals, memorial services, wakes, or shivas, following the family's culture. Rituals are part of life; they are a source of comfort, and they help build memories of the infant who died. It is important to explain to children beforehand what will take place during the ritual and that those attending may be sad, may cry, or may show strong emotions. Younger children should have a trusted person with them, as parents may be overwhelmed and therefore may have difficulty being supportive. It is important to help children understand that these rituals provide the grieving family and friends with a time, place, and occasion to cherish and remember the infant who died, and they create a way to say goodbye.

SELECT RESOURCES

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- KidsAid. <http://www.kidsaid.com>.
- M.I.S.S. Foundation. <http://www.missfoundation.org/kids/index.html>.
- O'Connor J. 2004. *Children & Grief*. Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell.
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- SIDS Mid-Atlantic. 2006. *When SIDS Occurs in Child Care Settings*. http://www.sidsma.org/bereaved_families/bereavement_packet/sids_in_childcare.html.

For grief counseling (in English and Spanish), call First Candle's bereavement hotline at (800) 221-7437 (available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week).
<http://www.firstcandle.org>.

For additional resources, see the resource guide *Bereavement Support*, National Sudden and Unexpected Infant/Child Death and Pregnancy Loss Resource Center.
<http://www.sidscenter.org/Bereavement>.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

HRSA's Maternal and Child Health Bureau supports a consortium of four national centers that address issues surrounding sudden unexpected infant death:

- National Sudden and Unexpected Infant/Child Death and Pregnancy Loss **Resource Center** (<http://www.sidscenter.org>).
- National Sudden and Unexpected Infant/Child Death and Pregnancy Loss **Program Support Center** (<http://www.firstcandle.org>).
- National Sudden and Unexpected Infant/Child Death and Pregnancy Loss **Project IMPACT** (<http://www.suid-im-projectimpact.org>).
- National Sudden and Unexpected Infant/Child Death and Pregnancy Loss Project at the **National Center for Cultural Competence** (<http://nccc.georgetown.edu/projects/sids/index.html>).

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